



‘The great catastrophe to our letters’? – Eliot, his influence and its American critique

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THE following comments presuppose a number of commonplaces: that T.S. Eliot is a poet of the first rank; that his influence on culture, the academy and criticism is, for better or worse, extensive; that he was an intellectual of integrity and a Christian of profound and, indeed, prophetic vision. What follows is an appraisal of some of the contradictory reasons why he has had the influence he has had and why his poetry has had less influence than is often acknowledged. On the way I point, here and there, to some of the poetry’s deficiencies and to those critics, principally in America, who identified these. Dana Gioia has suggested that Eliot was ‘the most influential English-language poet and critic of the century’.¹ He is only half right, as I will endeavour to argue by a series of hints and guesses. Within this general aim, my more specific purpose is to resuscitate the work of two almost forgotten writers, Yvor Winters and Karl Shapiro, both brilliant and scathing critics of Eliot. While my comments draw on the American critique of Eliot, they are not, however, restricted to it.²

When Eliot inverted the immortal and often-quoted words of Mary Queen of Scots, ‘in my beginning is my end’, few – least of all Eliot himself – discerned the ironic, delicious echo of Whitman, the holy fool of American letters.³ Eliot was at pains to point out that he and Pound owed nothing to Whitman: ‘I did not read Whitman until much later in life.... I am equally certain – it is indeed obvious – that Pound owes nothing to Whitman. This is an elementary observation’.⁴ In 1855, in ‘Song of Myself’, Whitman had gone to equal trouble to distinguish himself from





the type of man of whom Eliot would become the outstanding example in the twentieth century:

*I have heard what the talkers were talking, the talk of the beginning and
the end,
But I do not talk of the beginning or the end.*⁵

Eliot is certainly a 'talker', in Whitman's pejorative sense, and unlike Whitman's talk, much of Eliot's is of the beginning and the end. Between 'Let us go, then' and the 'human voices' that wake us, between the 'cold coming' and the 'whimper' that ends the world, there is indeed time for little else. If all philosophy is a meditation on death, then Eliot was a great philosopher, or at least a relentless one. But it is with a certain sense of relief that one turns from such 'talk' back to the 'barbaric yawp' of the 'pig-headed father' of American verse (as Pound famously described Whitman) and his zest for the here-and-now: the dapple of light and shade on the trees, the spears of summer grass and the crush of grass underfoot – all the joyous particulars of existence so conspicuous by their absence from Eliot's poetry.

Eliot had what he called 'an aversion' to Whitman's form, 'as well as to much of his matter',⁶ but where Eliot's own poetry is concerned one often wishes for less art and more matter – more concrete, sensuous detail, more evidence that Eliot lived in a real time and a real place; in other words, more of the local and the particular. No other major poet was so generalised in his feeling; none had less appreciation for 'things counter, original, spare, strange'; and none took less delight in what Louis MacNeice called 'the drunkenness of things being various'. Where you can feel Whitman's heartbeat, and see the smoke of his breath; where you can taste the delicious plums William Carlos Williams steals from the ice-box; where you can smell the narcotic aroma of apples that sends Robert Frost drowsing off as his ladder sways against a buoyant apple bow, you cannot touch or smell a single one of Eliot's roses (it is the 'specter of the rose', after all, which Eliot treats) or hear the voice of the hidden waterfall.

Eliot's work, if not his faith, is essentially dis-incarnational, full of unembodied concepts and abstractions that remain 'a perpetual possibility / Only in a world of speculation' ('Burnt Norton', I). This is particularly





true of his major poems, *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*, neither of which contains his best work. *The Waste Land*, while brilliant, is – as Frank O'Connor said of Joyce's *Ulysses* – 'a crashing bore'. But it is also something much worse; for, essentially unreadable as poetry, it is not studied as poetry but as a cultural monument, a series of brilliant fragments that demand re-contextualising. It was the work which created what Elizabeth Judge has called the 'academics' need for new texts with multiple levels of meaning susceptible to critical interpretation.... In essence, Eliot understood and fostered the academic enterprise for which his canonicity is the bestowed prize.... Eliot underst[ood] that the fortunes of the modernist text lie not with the common reader but with the scholar who prizes its obscurity and layered allusions'.⁷ She continues:

*Intuitively aware of the institutional connection with modernism's complexity, Eliot privileges the poetry which best dramatizes the hard work of the academic. Hence, Eliot is careful that his notes to The Waste Land do not foreclose professional discourse on his work.*⁸

The Waste Land was the supreme example of what Karl Shapiro described as 'culture poetry':

*If we posit two types of poetry, culture poetry and just poetry, the first type is that which attempts to explain culture.... Culture poetry is always didactic, as indeed most modern poetry is. It is a means to an end, not an end, like art. Culture poetry is poetry in reverse; it dives back into the historical situation, into culture, instead of flowering from it. And there it remains to enrich the ground for criticism.... Culture poetry, which is what modern poetry is, can be precisely described in every way. We know its forms, its psychology, its subject matter, and even its aims. It has a definite and limited number of themes, a prescribed method of composition, as well as a set formula for comprehension. Under the bad and obscurantist writing of criticism and its textbooks, under the weird confusion of the anthology, we find everything laid out neatly. The atmosphere of modern poetry is that of the hospital, of criticism, that of the dissecting room. The patient is never expected to recover*⁹

At the same time, then, as *The Waste Land* provides an opportunity for endless reinterpretation and unearthing of source-material, it also provides a comforting, predictable template of the High Modernist enterprise for those – the academics – charged with the task (and charging for the task)





of disseminating it. In this respect, what a professor of classics once said of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* was for a time also true – with some slight modifications – of *The Waste Land*:

*It is a cold book. It has become a standard text in college literature courses because... it has an air of erudition; and chiefly because, tickling the rebellious sentiments of graduate assistants, it is at once teachable and seditious, excellent material for those who would immerse themselves and their students in the destructive element.*¹⁰

The Waste Land is both morally and aesthetically seditious. The Australian poet Robert Fitzgerald, who was certainly no philistine or moralist, said that Eliot was responsible for 'the wreckage of poetry as tradition knows it' and that 'the motive was obviously hatred, the symptom of a disease in society'. Eliot, he said, had a 'very hatred of life, and passion, and desire'.¹¹ Yet even though *The Waste Land* was for a time celebrated because of its seditiousness (why else would Anthony Blanche so delight in it?), Eliot's conversion to Anglo-Catholicism meant that such readings could not survive, since the readings of all Eliot's work had to keep pace with his biography. Eliot made sure of it. His conversion created a new audience for *The Waste Land*, the cultural conservative, for whom the work formulaically points to the moral of the West's decline, to which *Ash-Wednesday*, the Ariel poems and, later, *Four Quartets* spiritually respond as part of Eliot's cultural antiphonal.

Four Quartets are, needless to say, impossible to ignore. But one might compare reading them to panning for gold: there are, as in so much of Eliot's lesser work, some beautiful flecks and off-cuts, but these can only be gleaned amidst much grey-brown water rocking back and forth with that steady yet monotonous rhythm, the 'dying fall' of High Modernism. It is poetry as ideology. As Eliot openly admitted, 'the poetry does not matter'. Take away the ideology and what is left is 'a periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion'. Modern literature contains no franker admission of failure. The logical conclusion of this admission is, however, often lost on many of Eliot's admirers and Christian disciples. The latter are particularly interesting. How can we explain the persistence of an aesthetically seditious poem on the syllabi of so many conservative liberal arts colleges? A typical example of the way *The Waste Land* is often studied





in such colleges can be found in this course description from Christendom College, Virginia, one of the most successful of the robustly orthodox Catholic colleges to emerge since the late 1960s. It reflects the tone of Eliot's own statements in essays such as 'Religion and Literature', *Notes towards the Definition of a Culture* and *The Idea of a Christian Society*, and is testament to Eliot's influence over the conservative-Catholic-intellectual imagination:

ENGL 202 The Literature of Western Civilization IV. The fourth semester of the literature core treats of the secularization of Western literary culture consequent on the fragmentation of Christendom by the Protestant Revolt and the so-called Enlightenment, focusing on the tensions between a Christian and a deformed understanding of man's nature and destiny. These tensions are reflected in, inter alia, Goethe's Faust, Shelley's Frankenstein, Jane Austen's Persuasion, Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment, Conrad's Heart of Darkness, and T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land. A recovery of the Christian vision of man in the twentieth century is represented by Eliot's Ash Wednesday and Evelyn Waugh's Brideshead Revisited. Required of all students.

Had Eliot never converted to creedal Christianity, or responded to *The Waste Land* with *Four Quartets*, or articulated a vision of Christian culture (one which, incidentally, he effectively 'borrowed' wholesale from Christopher Dawson), it seems doubtful whether *The Waste Land* would be studied in such colleges. Its effect on the study of literature was so disastrous that it seems impossible to imagine cultural and religious conservatives defending it on any grounds other than the impeccability of its author's ideological credentials. Eliot is requisitioned to the cause of cultural conservatism even though, ironically, his poetry did much to unsettle the norms of English prosody for which this conservatism pines. The same readers – and I can only confirm this anecdotally – who reject Whitman and Williams on account of their use of free verse, embrace Eliot despite his far more revolutionary poetic.

When a group of American professors at the University of Kansas wrote in the 1970s that 'we deplore the contemporary emphasis upon the "analysis" of poetry, an activity which spoils the delight and implies that the analyst should be aloof from poetry rather than participating





in it',¹² they did not acknowledge, although they no doubt realised, that Eliot himself played a large part in this placement of poetry under the microscope where it is murdered in order to be dissected. Poetry under the influence of Eliot and Pound became a thing 'pinned and wriggling on the wall'. In response, as Shapiro says, 'a frightening quantity of modern poetry is written to the criticism; it is hothouse grown, factory made. Such poetry may even become famous, if criticism takes a shine to it'.¹³ This is surely one reason why William Carlos Williams, the single most influential voice in modern American verse, referred to *The Waste Land* as 'the great catastrophe to our letters'.¹⁴ Before its appearance, Williams believed himself – and through him, American poetry generally – to be on the verge of recovering 'the elementary principle of all art, in the local conditions. Our work staggered to a halt for a moment under the blast of Eliot's genius which gave the poem back to the academics.... I knew at once that in certain ways I was most defeated'.¹⁵

Williams was the heir of Whitman's free-ranging democratic spirit, which sought to embody itself in a verse faithful to the local and the particular, to the concrete realities of middle-America and the accents and rhythms of its speech. As such, he felt not only defeated but betrayed by Eliot as much as by his friend Ezra Pound, who rejected democracy as decadent and the local and particular as provincial. Yet Williams has proved a far more influential poet in America than either Eliot or Pound. A cursory glance through an average anthology of American poetry will yield a crop of poems written in imitation or veneration of Williams; yet, with the exception of Hart Crane's 'The Bridge', almost none that could be described as Eliotian.

Williams was one of a number of important American writers to deplore the influence of Eliot. Yvor Winters and Karl Shapiro were two others. Winters believed that 'the theory and influence of Eliot... seem to me the most dangerous and nearly the least defensible of our time'.¹⁶ In a letter to Allen Tate he declared:

I wish to God Eliot had never been born.... As a nihilist (so far as his poems represent any personal contribution at all, they represent a nihilist refusal to live), tragedy, the facing of which alone can lend life dignity, becomes





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*impossible to Eliot – as he admits when he tells how the world will end....
What this generation needs is to be fished by somebody's boathook out of the
marsh of Eliot and steeped in the good bitter stoicism of Hardy and Emily
Dickinson.*¹⁷

Winters' essay 'T.S. Eliot or The Illusion of Reaction' remains the most systematic, powerful and relentless of any of the critiques of Eliot's legacy. Winters uncovers some glaring inconsistencies in Eliot's theory and practice, arguing that he was essentially confused – to the point of being crippled – by the pull from either direction of romanticism and classicism. Eliot, Winters writes,

*has repeatedly contradicted himself on every important issue he has touched.... The fact of the matter is that at any given time he can speak with equal firmness and dignity on both sides of almost any question, and with no realization of the difficulties in which he is involved.... He has loosely thrown together a collection of disparate and fragmentary principles which fall roughly into two contradictory groups, the romantic on the one hand and on the other the classical and Christian; and being unaware of his own contradictions, he is able to make a virtue of what appears to be private spiritual laziness.*¹⁸

In Winters' view, Eliot's theory of the 'objective correlative' (which assumes that emotion comes before comprehension, and that it seeks a form that needs be expressed but not understood) is romantic. Eliot, he proves beyond doubt, sometimes adopts this view in regard to other writers but sometimes contradicts it. Lancelot Andrewes, for example, is praised because his emotion is evoked by the object of contemplation, whereas Donne is criticised because his emotion goes in search of an object adequate to his feelings. As Winters argues, 'Donne is blamed' for adhering to the very principle Eliot elsewhere expounds as essential. It is for such reasons that, as Shapiro says, 'no scholar has been able to reconcile the fundamental contradictions in Eliot's criticism, any more than one can reconcile Pound's Confucianism with his fascism'.¹⁹ Eliot is also criticised by Winters for arguing that a poet should be 'indifferent to various theories of value'. 'How', asks Winters, 'can an artist perform a function better for not knowing what it is?'²⁰

However, Winters reserves his harshest words for *The Waste Land*: 'Eliot,





in dealing with debased and stupid material, felt himself obliged to seek his form in his matter: the result is confusion and journalistic reproduction of detail.... [T]he meter of *The Waste Land* is not the suave meter of *The Cantos* or of "Gerontion": it is a broken blank verse interspersed with bad free verse and rimed doggerel'.²¹ In a letter to Marianne Moore of Dec 4, 1922, he had said that 'I dislike the *Waste Land* on the whole, despite its excellent scattered passages... [I]t does not hold together – perceptually or rhythmically'.²² In the same month he suggested to another correspondent that while *Ulysses* (the other hot topic of literary conversation at this time) was 'the greatest achievement of our time', *The Waste Land* had 'very little fusion of sound and content' and was characterised by its 'stretches of verbosity.... By all odds the worst thing Eliot has done'.²³

Shapiro, arguing with the same force, discerns a number of similar flaws in Eliot's poetics and theory, but he was less concerned than was Winters about Eliot's poetic influence, declaring that 'Eliot exists only on paper, only in the minds of a few critics. No poet with so great a name has ever had less influence on poetry. At no point in the career of Eliot has there been the slightest indication of a literary following'.²⁴ It is ironic that a poet so 'promiscuous', as Richard Wilbur described him, in his 'echoing of previous literature'²⁵ should himself be so little echoed in the verse of others. Yet it remains an incontestable fact, though it is one often overlooked because Eliot's legacy as a modern poet is rarely assessed by looking at his poetic influence on other poets. When such assessments are made, the focus is usually on British poetry where one hears Eliot faintly echoed in the poetry of David Jones. Few critics, however, look to the United States. When we do, we see that it is not appropriate to talk of a poetic legacy at all, even a negative one. Eliot's voice is so muffled in the work of his American contemporaries and their heirs as to be almost non-existent. Let us call it a whimper. 'Insofar as Eliot has enjoyed a poetic influence', Shapiro argues, 'it lies outside literature entirely and is what can only be called a "spiritual" influence. This spiritual influence is calculated and synthetic; and insofar as it fails as a true influence, it removes Eliot's one and only claim to literary power. But here he does not entirely fail'.²⁶ Although he does not explore it, what Shapiro surely





meant by this 'spiritual influence' was the hold Eliot's cultural vision had over the Southern Agrarians and the New Critics, among whom Tate was prominent. While Eliot's influence on American verse was negligible, his influence on the spiritual, critical and cultural vision of the nation's poets was not.

In the final analysis, however, a poet's influence (which is a separate question from his greatness) upon a nation's poetry and poetry at large is surely best measured by his effect on the style, tone and direction of poetry itself, most especially the work of major poets. On the American landscape, only Hart Crane in 'The Bridge' looked to Eliot, and, as was typical of Crane, he did so only to make the gesture of his turning away all the more dramatic. Crane wrote that 'there is no one writing in English who can command so much respect, to my mind, as Eliot.... However, I take Eliot as a point of departure toward an almost complete reverse of direction'.²⁷ As Susan Schultz has noted: 'In positioning himself against Eliot, Crane joined the league of Walt Whitman'.²⁸ Crane believed the vision of *The Waste Land* was too negative. He wanted to go beyond it, but could not. In the end he succeeded only in throwing himself into the embrace of the Gulf of Mexico. There Eliot's poetic influence on modern verse seems to end – with a literal and tragic death by water.

Notes

- 1 *Can Poetry Matter?* (Graywolf Press, Saint Paul, Minn., 1992), p.143.
- 2 I am indebted to the poet Robert Gray for pointing me in the direction of the works of Winters and Shapiro and the letters of William Carlos Williams.
- 3 The Australian poet and critic Geoffrey Dutton was one who did. Cf. Geoffrey Dutton, *Whitman* (Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh, 1961), p. 66.
- 4 'Introduction', in Ezra Pound, *Selected Poems* (Faber and Faber, London, 1929), pp.viii-ix.
- 5 Walt Whitman, *Collected Poems* (Penguin, London, 1986), p.65.
- 6 'Introduction', in Pound, *op. cit.*, p.viii.
- 7 Elizabeth Judge, 'Notes on the Outside: David Jones, "Unshared Backgrounds", and (the Absence of) Canonicity', *English Literary History* 68. 1 (2001). 193.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 *In Defense of Ignorance* (Vintage, New York, 1965), pp.22, 21.
- 10 John Senior, *The Death of Christian Culture* (Arlington, New York, 1978), p.73.
- 11 'An Attitude to Modern Poetry', *Southerly* 9. 3 (1948), 191.
- 12 Quoted in Robert Carlson, *Truth on Trial: Liberal Education be Hanged* (Dumb Ox Books, Chicago, 1995), p.153.
- 13 Shapiro, *op. cit.*, p.12





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- 14 *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (New Directions, New York, 1948), p.146.
- 15 Williams, *op. cit.*, pp. 146, 174
- 16 Yvor Winters *In Defense of Reason* (Ohio University Press, Athens, Ohio, 1947), p. 501.
- 17 Yvor Winters, *Selected Letters* ed. R.I. Barth (Swallow Press, Athens, Ohio, 2000), p.113.
- 18 Winters, *In Defense of Reason*, *op. cit.*, pp.460, 465, 500.
- 19 Karl Shapiro, *In Defense of Ignorance* (Vintage, New York, 1965), p.29.
- 20 Winters, *In Defense of Reason*, *op. cit.*, p.469.
- 21 Winters, *In Defense of Reason*, *op. cit.*, pp.499-500.
- 22 Winters, *Selected Letters*, *op. cit.*, p.60.
- 23 Winters, *Selected Letters*, *op. cit.*, p.61.
- 24 Shapiro, *op. cit.*, pp.36-7.
- 25 Richard Wilbur, *Conversations with Richard Wilbur*. ed. William Butts (University of Mississippi Press, Jackson, 1990), p.38.
- 26 Shapiro, *op. cit.*, p.37
- 27 Susan Schultz, 'The Success of Failure: Hart Crane's Revisions of Whitman and Eliot in The Bridge', *South Atlantic Review* 54. 1 (1989), 56.
- 28 *Ibid.*

